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< **Chapter Five: Zara and angelique-iii-557358/)** **David II**

December, 2020

When I was a child, I never truly cared to observe it. But as I grew older, something struck me suddenly—the night sky was breathtaking.



Eternal, impossible to frame or confine.
Unchanging, yet never the same. I know I
must sound strange, even contradictory,
but I trust that anyone reading this will
understand what I mean.

Whenever we choose to look up, the
view shifts depending on where we stand.
More or less light pollution, northern or
southern hemisphere, the phase of the
moon... Isn't that incredible?

All those thoughts surfaced that night. I
stood frozen, utterly captivated by the
endless expanse of deep blue-black that I
had never taken the time to truly see. I
remember the hardness of the asphalt
beneath my back, the rough texture
pressing into me as I gazed upward,
mesmerized. A star here, another there,
the moon in its waning phase, and Venus
shining with striking intensity. That night,
I even managed to spot several
constellations I had once read about in
school.

Orion, Gemini, Cancer... They all
seemed to return the same curious stare I
was giving them. Heh... It sounds silly, but

I suppose just as I was astonished to see them for the first time, they too were surprised to find me watching them so intently.

"..."

My pupils remained fixed, yet lost in the vastness of the cosmos. And then, so unexpectedly, it appeared—a shooting star. Imagine my luck. I had never intended to gaze at the sky, and the first time I truly did, I was rewarded with something many long to witness but never do. The brilliant streak cut across from right to left, momentarily interrupting the breathtaking darkness, yet I didn't even flinch.

The ground was damp, the night... Hmm... I can't quite recall if it was cold or warm. Strange, considering it was winter. In fact, I remember it was just before Christmas. Yes, that Christmas I spent in Spain.

But back to the point: the temperature seemed unimportant, allowing me the luxury of one less concern as I continued

indulging in the celestial spectacle above.

So many questions flooded my mind. 'Do humans truly visit that void regularly? Are there, at this very moment, people living up there? That sounds utterly insane. How many ancient religions regarded the heavens as the dwelling place of their gods? What would their followers say if they lived in this era? Would they see those astronauts spending months in space stations as... deities?'

A philosophy professor could have built an entire lecture around the thoughts I had lying there.

I also recall a dull ache in my head—not unbearable, just bothersome. The kind of persistent headache that lingers all day, no matter how many pills you take, how long you sleep, or how much you distract yourself. You just know it won't leave until the next morning. I tried to ignore it. I wasn't about to let something so trivial rob me of the pleasure of finally grasping how sublime the universe truly was.

Oh, right. A shooting star. They say you're supposed to make a wish. A few

seconds after it passed, I remembered that little tradition. But then I wondered—'what are the rules for that? How long do you have to make a wish after seeing one? And what about after the fact? Five? Ten seconds? Do I have to think of something within fifteen seconds, or else the chance is gone? Does it need to be sealed in some way? Just thinking it, or do I have to say it out loud? Maybe write it down? No, wait—what would I even do with the paper afterward? And if I do write it, does it count the same if it's on paper or typed on my phone? Does language matter? Because I speak German, English, and a bit of Hungarian, but since I'm in Spain, maybe I should do it in Spanish. Shit, I should've learned more from the locals...'

As I debated the absurd, another streak of light raced across the sky.

'Two in one night? What luck. I'm sure I'll lose every bet with David from now on—I have clearly spent all my fortune in this single moment.'

So astonished by my own good fortune, I recalled something from school. These

"meteor showers" that happen occasionally, when hundreds or even thousands of shooting stars streak across the sky in a single night. I vaguely remembered reading that in some parts of the world, these events were quite frequent. Maybe this was one of them. That didn't make it any less extraordinary to me.

The sky felt like it belonged to me. Every celestial body seemed to align to offer the most spectacular view possible, and all I could do was marvel at every little detail. So much so that I even forgot about my headache.

"...?"

Another one. Yes, definitely a meteor shower. That realization allowed me to relax even more. Feeling as though it was the first movement I had made in hours, I let out an incredibly slow, contented sigh, sinking ever so slightly into the concrete for a better view. Nothing would disturb this moment. Or at least, I wouldn't let

anything do so.

I hadn't mentioned it earlier, but one thing I vividly remembered was the stark contrast between the night sky in a sprawling city and in a place far removed from urban life. The sheer number of stars was staggering. I don't mean to sound dramatic, but witnessing such an overwhelming vastness, I could finally understand why ancient humans felt so insignificant—watched, judged by the celestial bodies above. It was mesmerizing.

I won't say it became a habit after that night, but it's true that I started looking up more often. While standing watch, when a window was nearby, when walking alone through a shattered city... when Angelique... well, that last one is a far more recent story.

Another shooting star.

With each passing streak, the surprise diminished, but not the beauty. It wasn't just the aesthetics of the event that struck me—it was its sheer magnificence. Just think about it for a second. Every shooting star was a colossal rock, hurtling at

unimaginable speeds through the cosmic void. Where had it come from? Where would it end up? Perhaps it had been traveling for centuries, desperately escaping the gravitational pull of some giant in another solar system, like a prisoner fleeing their jailer. And after so many years of wandering aimlessly... it passed at just the right distance from Earth, illuminated by the Sun, and... reflected in my eye.

Anyone who doesn't shudder at a thought like that has a dead soul.

Perhaps divine will, or maybe a coincidence of astronomical proportions, but such an event—one that defies casual reasoning—had just occurred. And three times! How could I not feel blessed?

Another meteor. And another. Then another. And before I could blink, yet another. A true celestial rainstorm, streaking tirelessly from right to left in a poetic cascade. A part of me felt like a child, mesmerized by an event whose grandeur is studied by scholars worldwide—brilliant minds tirelessly chasing the

chance to witness such an astonishing convergence of phenomena.

But no, I wasn't a child. I was a young soldier on duty, who, for the first time in his life, understood what it meant to have ignored something truly unparalleled for so long. If anything changed in me that night, it was that I decided to start paying more attention. To things that had always gone unnoticed. The scent of wet earth, the way icy wind feels when it strikes your face, that exact moment when water grows still enough to perfectly reflect your image... Ah, hell. I lost my train of thought.

And another shooting star.

No, that one was different. It moved from left to right—opposite to all the others. My expression finally shifted. I frowned, thinking I must have made a mistake. But no. Another meteor, again from left to right.

I had never read or heard of a meteor shower where the streaks moved in opposite directions. No, that was impossible. Too unnatural. But another,

and then another, and before I could process it, yet another. My eyes widened as I realized the lights were weaving and colliding unpredictably—a chaotic, almost hostile spectacle.

As my gaze darted back and forth, struggling to make sense of the anomaly, the familiar face of my cherished companion suddenly filled half my vision.

"Alez! Alez! Wake up! It's me!"

Her voice was the only thing I could hear. Zaralyne looked agitated. There was a mix of urgency and fear in her expression. She stared down at me, brows furrowed, and only when I noticed the position of her shoulders did I realize—and feel—that she was gripping mine with both hands. Her dark blue-black hair, like the night sky, was unkempt, strands falling loose around her face. A thin stream of red trickled down the side of her cheek.

"Zara...?"

I finally managed to speak, and the deafening roar of gunfire rushed back into my ears. Zara's face showed a fleeting hint of relief— almost a smile. Then, as I was still fully taking in her features, she turned to call out to someone behind her.

"Alez is awake! He's conscious, but I think he's too disoriented!"

"Tough fucker. We need to get him back! Is he badly hurt?!"

"Doesn't seem too serious, but his head's still bleeding!"

I didn't know who she was speaking to, but I clearly remember how both of them had to shout over the chaos of bullets to be understood. Zara turned back toward me, scanning my body quickly for any wounds. Arms, legs, torso... She didn't seem to find anything too concerning. The look on her face could only be described as equally relieved and terrified.

"No other injuries— he should be fine if we get him to medics!"

"We can't move from here, Zara! The second we lift our heads, we're dead!"

"Zara..."

"If we don't move, he's going to bleed out here, Helek!"

Of course. I remembered now. It was Helek.

"Didn't you just say it didn't seem that bad?!"

"Hey... hey, Zara..."

My voice was too weak for her to hear. I shifted my head slightly to get a better look at her and caught sight of her companion— gripping his standard-issue AUG, returning fire from behind the makeshift sandbag barricade shielding us. As they argued, my sluggish eyes wandered across the limited battlefield I could see. Smoke, fire. Rubble all around me. Then, an unbearable pain surged

through my skull— the back of my head, specifically. A C-101 jet flew overhead, unloading a 12.7mm barrage at a target I couldn't see, and— Pieces of my memory clicked into place.

Zaragoza, Spain. A joint operation between both nations. With the situation in Austria relatively under control, the European Union had requested support for one of the countries closest to collapse. We were stationed at the main entrance of the airbase, standing guard. David, Zara, and I were on duty. The last thing I remembered was an explosion— and then, nothing.

"David already reported our status, Zara! We just need to hold out until help arrives!"

"But—!"

"Zara, just help me out here, please!!"

At his desperate shout, that woman— just two years older than me— cast me a worried glance, then reached for her rifle, which had been lying beside her. She

leaned out from cover and opened fire.

My head was still spinning, and all I could do was watch like an idiot as Zaralyne's relatively short hair whipped violently from the automatic gunfire. There was another rifle on the ground, and it didn't take much to realize it was mine. I forced strength into my left arm, reaching out to grab it, but my vision was too blurred. My mind was too slow to be of any use to her.

After such a pathetic display of weakness, I sighed painfully and looked up. Of course, there were no shooting stars in the night sky. Only bullets tearing through the air, streaking past, while light fighters and helicopters occasionally flashed through my vision.

The damp sensation at the back of my neck? My own blood, soaking my hair and running down my skin. Suddenly, nausea welled up in my stomach, but I managed to suppress it. I reached out again, this time gripping the AUG by the barrel. Pulling it toward me, my pale, trembling hands wrapped around it as they should. I

couldn't stand and fire, but simply holding the weapon— this tool of death— gave me a strange sense of security.

And yet, something else was bothering me. Helek, the guy shooting beside Zaralyne, had yelled at her far too harshly despite not even being her superior. In my dazed, feverish state, I told myself I'd hit him later. Of course, I never actually did.

"Alez!"

Zara's gaze flicked downward again to check on me, her expression shifting slightly when she saw me clutching the rifle. Though she might have tried to hide it, I caught the small smile before she raised her voice again.

"Don't even think about it, Alez. Just wait, okay? As soon as—"

Her steady voice tried to soothe me, but it failed. I saw it— behind her, against the dark sky blending into her raven-black hair— an NH-90 helicopter closing in. Its

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side hatch slid open, revealing two Spanish soldiers unleashing suppressive fire against the hostiles pinning us down from the other end of the airstrip. I remember those men were armed with G36 rifles. In fact, I think that was the first time I had ever seen one up close. They maintained fire for about a minute until it was safe to descend.

"Kyd must have sent them, Zara! Get Alez ready to board!"

"On it!"

As they spoke and Zaralyne turned back toward me, the helicopter touched down just meters ahead.

"Alez, let me... take that."

My ever-protective companion— the one who was always there to help, no matter what— carefully took hold of my arm, lifting me up with gentle but unwavering strength. She never let go.

That was when I finally saw it. The full extent of our surroundings. Austrian and Spanish soldiers returning fire in all directions, while Amere's forces— nothing more than terrorists to me back then— fought to bring the entire base to ruin. Bodies— and fragments of them— littered the area. Most belonged to the enemy, but many Spanish officers lay among the dead. One of the soldiers on board the chopper shouted something, but I couldn't make it out.

Zara guided me toward the aircraft, only releasing my hand once I was seated inside. I remember her setting my AUG down beside me.

"We still have to secure the west sector, Alez! Don't worry, I'll be fine!"

Of course, the pilot didn't wait for us to say goodbye. The helicopter began to rise, and Zara just kept shouting as I ascended.

"If you see David or Kyd, tell them this stretch of land is more or less under

control!!"

After that, she gave me another of those small, knowing smiles before scooping her rifle off the ground and sprinting off with Helek.

"Shit..."

The men in the helicopter spoke among themselves in a language I had never learned, while I did my best to stay conscious, letting out quiet groans of pain. I don't know how long the flight lasted or exactly where in the base they took me, but I vividly recall seeing it all through the barely open hatch. Explosions, gunfire, flames, and smoke. Pure chaos. Screams in the distance.

Despite my best efforts, I must have blacked out at some point, because the next thing I remember was snapping my eyes open as the helicopter jolted upon landing. The doors slid open, and Spanish soldiers took me by the arms, pulling me out.

"Alez!! Fuck, you're...!"

That was David's voice. As I was helped off the helicopter, the first thing I saw was his terrified face, gripping me tightly on my right side.

"We have a stretcher ready on the right. Help me carry him."

The words, spoken in that distinctively calming tone, belonged to Allen, the platoon medic. He held my left arm while carrying my AUG in his free hand.

. . .

"Doesn't seem too bad."

That was the verdict of the blonde medic with a bitter expression as he laid me face down on a stretcher in the base's medical sector. Wounded soldiers and medics filled the space, the latter rushing from one side

to the other, prioritizing the most severe injuries. Groans, stifled cries, ragged breathing, and the occasional feminine voice overwhelmed by pain... I've always hated places like that.

"Good thing, no stitches needed. The dizziness comes from a concussion, and the wound is only superficial, but it's been open for too long. That, and the fact that it's in a sensitive area—just below the occipital bone. Any deeper, and the story would've been different. He'll be fine."

"Lucky bastard. Damn it, he had us worried."

David and Allen kept talking while the latter cleaned my head wound. Then I wondered—why was David in here instead of helping with the defense outside? Later, I learned that the building he and Kyd had been protecting collapsed. While escaping, a chunk of the ceiling fell on his right arm, fracturing it.

"Alez, can you hear me?"

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"..."

"Is that a no?"

"Yeah... I hear you."

"Vann Floors, don't make him think too much."

"Oh, no problem. Alez never thinks too much to begin with."

Very funny. But, to be honest, knowing David was still this lively helped calm me down. He distracted me—from the pain, from the dizziness, from the horrible guttural sounds that filled the wide hall lined with hospital stretchers.

"How's Zara?"

"She's... fine..."

"Just fine? She's not hurt? Who was with her?"

"She's fine."

"You don't remember who—?"

"Vann Floors."

Allen interrupted suddenly. I could only

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imagine the terrifying glare he shot at David that made him fall silent for a long moment. In that silence, the gunfire and explosions outside returned to my awareness. Of course—beyond the relative safety of this space, a brutal battle raged on. Having already participated in multiple defense, assault, rescue, and sabotage operations, I no longer feared combat the way I had back at that parking lot. Still, I wasn't completely accustomed to it. Maybe I should've been grateful for the dizziness—had I been fully aware, my nerves might've driven me to grab my weapon and rush back into the fight, injury be damned.

"Alez, one more thing."

"Vann F—"

"Relax, relax. Just trying to keep him awake."

At some point, David sat on a closed supply crate beside my stretcher, smiling at me reassuringly. That stupid, pretty-faced redhead. There should be a limit to how

charismatic someone can be. I hate to admit it, but his gaze managed to fully calm me down. The bastard was a natural at using his charm, making everyone feel like he was their ideal older brother.

Damn, I miss him.

"Thank you, Alez."

"Huh...?"

It caught me off guard—my eyebrows raised slightly, which made him chuckle.

"Yeah, figured you wouldn't remember. You saved my ass out there, man."

For some reason, Allen no longer felt like interrupting. Maybe he'd finished treating me; I could no longer feel his rough fingers on my nape, only the tight stretch of medical tape covering the wound.

"The first explosion stunned all of us. Neither Zara, you, nor I reacted quickly, so

the second explosion—much closer—almost took the three of us out."

"..."

"I should mention, you were rough. The watchtower beside us started collapsing, and you grabbed Zara by the arm and threw her out of the way like a ragdoll. She hit the ground hard, but it wasn't anything serious."

I remembered the thin red line on Zaralyne's soft cheek. How curious.

"And right after that, you tackled me, knocking me out of the way. Quite the hero, our supreme savior. That's how you lost consciousness—hit by a large chunk of the wall. When I ran to the main patrol and left you with Zara, you weren't bleeding, so seeing you step off that helicopter like that scared the hell out of me."

Even knowing the sarcasm in his voice, it was unsettling to hear David call me a hero. I was a coward, and he'd seen enough

to know that firsthand in that parking lot.

"So yeah, thanks, Alez. I'll buy you a drink when we get out of this shithole—"

"I..."

"Hm? Yeah?"

"I don't drink..."

"Ah... he... hahaha, yeah, that's true. But I'll make sure that changes!"

"Vann Floors, I'm putting him to sleep to ease the stress."

"Oh."

David nodded at our ever-reliable medic with a grin, then turned back to me.

"Good night, Alez."

"W-wait..."

"No waiting. Time to sleep."

"What you said... it's a lie, isn't it?"

David was... an interesting person. His facade was flawless, capable of deceiving

anyone with just a handsome face and friendly words. Impossible to detect his lies, impossible to find anything amiss. However... he was absolutely incapable of hiding his surprise. And this was one of those times. His eyes widened slightly, and his lips parted just a bit—but he couldn't seem to find the words he wanted.

"..."

That older brother I never had gave me one last smile—that same smile that belonged on a high-end fashion model.

"You did well, Alez. You really did. Good night!"

A sharp prick in my neck and... just like when a computer loses power, when a car engine fails, when a weapon runs out of ammunition, all my senses shut down, and the world turned black.

Nearly three hundred Amere members' bodies were recovered, while ninety-four members of the Spanish Air Force lost

their lives during the assault.

Austrian casualties: none. Well—almost three.

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